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Rome Inquiry: Was Agca Coached?

By JOHN TAGLIABUE
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ROME, Oct. 7 — An Italian magistrate has begun investigating accusations that the gunman who tried to kill Pope John Paul II in 1981 was later coached in jail to implicate the Bulgarian secret service in the attack.

Court officials said the magistrate, Franco Ionta, had questioned several underworld figures who may have involved the gunman, Mehmet Ali Agca, in a deal to concoct testimony implicating the Soviet bloc in the shooting in exchange for his freedom.

The investigation was another sign here of the growing official unease over the reliability of the testimony of Mr. Agca, the prosecution's key witness in the trial of eight men, including three Bulgarians. All are accused of conspiring to assassinate the Pope.

The officials said those questioned included Giovanni Pandico, an admitted mobster whose testimony led to the conviction in Naples in September of 137 organized-crime figures.

Ex-Military Official Implicated

In a magazine interview published in June, Mr. Pandico accused the former deputy head of military intelligence, Gen. Pietro Musumeci, of using underworld leaders to assure Mr. Agca, a Turk, that he would be freed if he implicated the Soviet bloc in the shooting.

The witnesses also included Gianni Melluso, another former racketeer turned state's witness, who told Judge Ionta that "not one word is true" of Mr. Pandico's testimony.

The intelligence agencies have confirmed that they sent two agents to visit Mr. Agca in jail in December 1981, but denied that they sought to influence his testimony.

The Eastern bloc press, including newspapers in Bulgaria and the Soviet Union, has printed articles saying the Bulgarian officials on trial here were being framed by Western secret services to smear Moscow and its allies.

'Increase My Credibility'

In several hours of testimony today, Sergei I. Antonov, the former Rome station chief of the Bulgarian state airline and the only Bulgarian defendant in Italian custody, reversed an account of events he gave in pretrial testimony, denying numerous details supplied to investigators by Mr. Agca to prove that the two men had known each other.

But Mr. Antonov, who waited at times up to a minute before replying to questions, staring blankly, was unable to explain the discrepancies.

The court has long been disturbed by

the fact that Mr. Agca often gives evidence that he later admits to having gleaned from television or newspaper reports. Chief Judge Severino Santiapichi was angered last week when Mr. Agca acknowledged that several telephone numbers he said he used to contact officials in West Germany of the Gray Wolves, a Turkish political organization, had actually come from Turkish newspaper articles. Asked why he offered the numbers to the court as evidence, Mr. Agca replied, "To increase my credibility."

The telephone numbers are among the pieces of evidence mustered against Musa Serdar Celebi, the former head of the Gray Wolves, who faces life imprisonment here for his purported involvement in the plot.

Mr. Pandico, in the interview, said the deal was the brainchild of Francesco Pazienza, a former senior intelligence official now in jail in New York awaiting extradition to Italy for involvement in political and financial scandals. Mr. Pazienza was formerly an aide to Gen. Giuseppe Santovito, the intelligence chief.

Mr. Agca has also implicated Mr. Pazienza, saying Mr. Pazienza visited him in prison and offered him a French passport and his freedom in exchange for testimony against the Soviet bloc. But Mr. Agca denied that he had been coached in any way.

Mr. Pazienza has said he left the intelligence service before the date of the purported meeting in April 1982 and had no access to the jail. He has also denied having anything to do with a plot to implicate the Soviet bloc in the attack on the Pope.

'Believe I Am Able to Clarify'

Last week, however, Mr. Pazienza again attracted attention by offering, in a telegram to the court here, to come to Rome to testify. In the telegram, he said he had closely followed Mr. Agca's testimony in the press. And, in words that raised more questions than they answered, he wrote, "I believe I am able to clarify facts and occurrences capable of leading to the truth, both as regards my person and the objective order of events."

In separate investigations, the former intelligence officials named by Mr. Pandico are also charged with using contacts within the Ascoli Piceno prison to establish links between the intelligence service and the Mafia, notably in a kidnapping case involving a Christian Democratic politician, Ciriaco De Mita, who was abducted by the Red Brigades terrorist group.

Judge Ionta is expected to question the former prison director, Cosimo Giordano, and the former prison chaplain, the Rev. Mariano Santini, the officials said. Father Santini was convicted in the Naples trial in September of abetting underworld leaders jailed at the time in Ascoli Piceno.

Officials said the investigation would also focus on discovering from whom Mr. Agca, who relies on the state for support because he is without means, obtained a television set and the numerous newspapers he regularly studies in his jail cell.

Mr. Antonov was questioned about details that Mr. Agca gave in testimony about Mr. Antonov's personal habits, including his cigar-smoking, his hobby of collecting miniature liquor bottles and his love of fresh flowers and pop music.

Mr. Antonov had confirmed most of those details to Judge Ilario Martella, the investigating magistrate whose work led to the trial. Today, however, Mr. Antonov denied them all.

Speaking Bulgarian slowly through an interpreter, he was unable to explain the reversal.